

Galatians

Unbound, Unchained, Unbroken

Week 8 | Galatians 4:8–4:20

Lisa Scheffler, author

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We've all had the experience of trying to persuade someone to come around to our way of thinking. Maybe you were craving Mexican food and worked to convince your family that they also wanted enchiladas for dinner. If you got your way, great. But if not, Chinese or barbeque was probably fine.

Sometimes, we try a lot harder to convince others because the stakes are much higher than what's for dinner. When it really matters, we use every tool of persuasion in our toolbox. When it's about more than getting our way, we'll work to persuade out of love.

Paul used every tool in his toolbox to convince the Galatian Christians that they were believing a false gospel opposed to the one he originally shared with them. He appealed to his authority as an apostle, his personal testimony, and cited the trust the other apostles had in his message. He then took the Galatians deep into scripture to consider how God has always saved, and what the law was for. He used analogies and even resorted to calling them foolish. Paul tried everything to persuade these beloved believers to return to the one, true gospel, because it is the only place true freedom is found.

In our passage for this week, we'll see Paul wrapping up one more theological argument and then turning to a personal appeal to persuade the Galatian Christians.

Day 1

In chapter 3, Paul made a radical comparison that would have outraged his Jewish Christian opponents. He spoke of the law as an enslaving force. Because the law revealed sin, it was an instrument of judgment that trapped those under it. Paul also characterized it as a guardian that was no longer needed because Christ had come. God adopts all people who trust in Christ as children and heirs. To return to the works of the law like circumcision or dietary

restrictions is to go back into slavery, instead of embracing the freedom and privilege of a child and heir.

In the passage we'll focus on this week, notice how Paul continues to compare those who return to the law to slaves. Then notice how he makes a personal appeal to the Galatian believers. Notice his tone. Can you relate to how Paul was feeling?

Read

Galatians 4:8–20 (NIV)

⁸ Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. ⁹ But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? ¹⁰ You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! ¹¹ I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.

¹² I plead with you, brothers and sisters, become like me, for I became like you. You did me no wrong. ¹³ As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you, ¹⁴ and even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself. ¹⁵ Where, then, is your blessing of me now? I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me. ¹⁶ Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?

¹⁷ Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you from us, so that you may have zeal for them. ¹⁸ It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good, and to be so always, not just when I am with you. ¹⁹ My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, ²⁰ how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!

- What tools in Paul's persuasion toolbox do you see him using?
- Based on everything we've studied in Galatians, why is Paul working so hard to convince these Christians? What is at stake?

Respond

Paul reminds me of an exasperated parent in these verses. Maybe you've known a child who has gone astray, maybe you've watched his or her parents do everything in their power to reach them. Maybe you've been that parent. Maybe you've had a friend or family member who is on course to go off a cliff, and nothing you have said or done has convinced them to change course. Can you relate to Paul's tone?

To me it sounds like Paul is frustrated, and he is hurt. He invested his life into these people and they've questioned his motives and doubted his word. They've allowed other voices to drown out Paul's, and he's trying to speak louder. But, he hasn't given up on them.

As we move through our passage this week, pray for "prodigals" in your life — the ones who have wandered from God and gone their own way. Pray for the Spirit's discernment as to how to relate to them. Paul's methods are not the best for every situation, but his motive is. Paul loves these people and is trying every tactic he can think of to help them recognize and believe the true gospel, and experience the true freedom that comes from being a child of God.

A mid-letter challenge

Galatians has six chapters, and last week we crossed over into chapter 4. Sometime this week, go back and read Galatians 1–3. Review the arguments Paul has made so far, and consider what your biggest takeaways from Galatians have been.

Day 2

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When a child reaches an age-appropriate milestone, but then regresses, parents are concerned. When a patient is recovering, but suddenly gets sicker, doctors take notice. It's not a good thing when positive progress is reversed. We want to keep growing, improving, and advancing.

For Paul, witnessing the Galatian Christians going backwards was tremendously frustrating. They had experienced the freedom found in Christ, but were willing to go back under slavery.

As you read our passage for today, notice the questions that Paul asks.

Read

Galatians 4:8–11

⁸ Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. ⁹ But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? ¹⁰ You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! ¹¹ I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.

- Why is Paul so frustrated?

Reflect

A lot of scholars see a short break in Galatians after the verses we read today. So, let's take a moment to review where we are.

This large section of Galatians that ends in 4:11 began at the beginning of chapter 3. Paul began with a strong rebuke and then asked a series of rhetorical questions meant to get the Galatians to “reexamine their experience of God’s miraculous work by his Spirit in their lives.”¹

- You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? (3:1)
- Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard? (3:2)
- Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh? (3:3)

Paul ends this section in much the same way — frustrated and trying to get the Galatians to see the tremendous error they are making by trading a Spirit-empowered relationship for slavery under the law and other “forces.” (We discussed this term, *stoicheia* in Greek, on Day 4 of last week’s EGD if you want to review.)

In Galatians 4:5–7, Paul reminded the Galatians that in the Spirit, they have begun to communicate with God as their *Abba*, Father (v. 6). Now he asks questions that point to the contrast between their present knowledge of God as his children and their former ignorance of God as slaves.

As commentator Walter Hansen puts in, “The essence of the father-child relationship that they now enjoy is reciprocal knowledge: the Father knows his child; the child knows the Father.” In going back and attempting to adhere to the law, they are rejecting the intimate knowledge of God that the Spirit provides and returning to the slavery they experienced in their former way of life. I think we can understand Paul’s frustration!

N.T. Wright draws a helpful comparison between what the Galatians, under the influence of certain Jewish Christians are doing, and what the ancient Israelites did after following Moses out of Egypt. In both cases God had freed people from slavery. In both cases they want to go back. Wright imagines that “They have had a look at the wide and worrying world of freedom, and they don’t like what they see. They are determined to return once more to the world where life seems safer, more regulated, where you know where you are: in other words, to the life of slavery.”²

We can turn to laws and legalism because it feels safer. For some of the Galatian Christians, that meant observing certain religious days in hopes of gaining God’s favor (verse 10). In our modern context, it can be trying to gain God’s favor by consuming only Christian media. The

¹ G. Walter Hansen, [Galatians](#), The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), Ga 4:8–11.

² Tom Wright, [Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians](#) (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 49.

problem is, laws and legalism don't require us to walk in the Spirit (a topic we'll get to eventually in Galatians 5). We can substitute the Spirit's leading by trusting in absolutes spelled out in black and white. But then our faith isn't about a relationship, but about justifying ourselves by following "the rules."

The law can become like any other idol or gods that are not gods as verse 8 says. Anything that we rely on more than God or find our identity in more than Christ can become an idol. We commit idolatry if that thing becomes an object of devotion. Slavish devotion to the law is just that, slavery. It can't bring freedom. Only Christ and the Spirit can.

Respond

Intimacy with your heavenly Father is far better than following a bunch of strict rules. That makes sense when we read it, but we can still make the same kinds of mistakes that the Galatian Christians made. If our faith becomes all about the "do's and don'ts" and not about the relationship we have with God through Christ, and by the Spirit, at best we've lost focus, and at worst we don't really know Jesus at all.

Has your faith ever been more about the rules than the relationship? If so, how so? How can the law provide guidance without becoming more important than the relationship you have with your Father?

Day 3

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I've seen people become so devoted to a program — whether it be for diet, exercise or learning a new skill — that sticking to the program's guidelines became more important than the reason they started the program in the first place. Any results that were gained became secondary to the rules that produced them.

One of Paul's points in Galatians chapter 3 all the way to 4:11 is something similar. Believers are in Christ and filled with his Spirit. They become God's children and heirs. But the Galatian Christians were making the works of the law more important than what the law pointed to — a relationship with God.

No wonder Paul takes a break from his theological arguments to plead with the Galatians. In the verses we'll look at today, we see Paul pause his more theological arguments and emphasize his personal relationship with the Galatians.

Read

Galatians 4:12–16

¹² I plead with you, brothers and sisters, become like me, for I became like you. You did me no wrong. ¹³ As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you, ¹⁴ and even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself. ¹⁵ Where, then, is your blessing of me now? I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me. ¹⁶ Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?

- What emotions do you sense behind Paul's words?

Reflect

Paul is taking the Galatians back to the time when Paul first met them. He's reminding them of his relationship with him and how they first received him and his message.

In asking them to become like him as he became like them, Paul is likely referring to his own disposition to the law. Paul was a Pharisee of the Pharisees. He knew the scripture inside and out and considered himself a righteous keeper of the law. But, when he met Jesus, he abandoned the law, accepted that he was a sinner, and turned to Jesus Christ.³ That's precisely what Paul wants to Galatians to do: become like him, one who didn't keep the law, because he became like them, a Gentile who trusted in Christ without following the law.

Scholars aren't sure what illness Paul was referring to in verse 13. Regardless, the Galatians welcomed him and his message. In fact, they were enthusiastic about what he was sharing. So much so that they received him as if he were "an angel of God" or "Christ Jesus himself" (verse 14).

Paul wants them to remember what they experienced when he had proclaimed the unbelievably good news of what Jesus had done for them. The Galatians believed Paul and trusted him. He reminds them of the time he spent with them, and the relationship that they had built. They held him in the highest esteem and would have done anything for him. Why were they letting themselves become convinced he had been lying? Why were they now angry that he was telling him the truth? The Galatians had turned their backs on Paul in favor of his opponents.

Although we should revere the Bible as God's Word, we shouldn't forget that its authors were real people with real struggles. This passage gives us a glimpse into Paul's heart for the people he ministered to. He loved them, and because he loved them, wasn't afraid to call them out

³ Scot McKnight, *Galatians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 218.

when necessary. Yet he also experienced all the same emotions we do when close relationships are strained and when it feels like the people you love are rejecting you.

Respond

We can imagine that Paul might have felt hurt, rejected or even betrayed by the Galatians. Have you ever been hurt by someone you were trying to help? How can we allow the Spirit into those situations? What do you think our perspective should be? How can having a firm identity in Christ help us endure difficult relationships?

Day 4

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My dad had a way of looking at you when he was trying to make a point. He'd tilt his chin down, look at you over the top of his glasses, and set his gaze. You knew what he was about to say was important and that you needed to stop and listen. He often had wisdom to share, and sometimes that wisdom involved a warning.

I envision my Dad's look when I read these verses from Galatians.

Read

Galatians 4:17–20

¹⁷ Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you from us, so that you may have zeal for them. ¹⁸ It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good, and to be so always, not just when I am with you. ¹⁹ My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, ²⁰ how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!

- What warning does Paul include here?
- Why do you think Paul uses an image of childbirth?

Reflect

Paul wants the Galatians to return to the true gospel, so they can enjoy their freedom in Christ as God's children and heirs. He cares for them, but he has no warm feelings towards those who have deceived and confused these believers.

Paul's opponents have called his motives into question, and Paul responds by questioning theirs. They wanted to persuade the Galatians, but for no good purpose. Their goal was to alienate these believers from Paul by stirring them up and moving them to wrong action.

Passion and zeal are good according to Paul, but not when it's expended for the wrong thing. As in Paul's day, there are a lot of passionate people in our world working hard for worthless, or even dangerous causes. We want to channel our zeal for the cause of Christ and the good of others.

Paul finishes his plea with a striking image — a mother in the pains of childbirth. As N.T. Wright explains it, Paul “feels like a mother who, after giving birth, finds herself going through labour pains all over again, watching her children struggle to become the mature adults they were supposed to be.”⁴ Paul wants the Galatians to come to maturity in Christ, to live in the freedom that Jesus provides.

Paul wanted to see the image of Christ formed in them, and for that transformation to affect the way they lived as his children and heirs. As McKnight describes it, “This would be a life of the Spirit, not the law; it would be centered in Christ, not Moses; it would be the universalism of the Abrahamic promise, not the nationalism of the Judaizing view of the Mosaic law.”⁵

Paul finishes this section by expressing his wish to be with the Galatians and make things right. After a year where most of us had to communicate remotely from those we love, we can relate to Paul's desire to be face to face. He knows that this letter is a poor substitute for an in-person conversation, so he's trying to communicate the urgency of his concern for them as best he can.

N.T. Wright makes a helpful observation about Paul's appeal here in these verses, and includes some advice for all of us:

“This is a direct appeal to the loyalty of friendship. Theological argument is important; but unless it takes place within a context where people are bonded together in mutual trust and shared Christian experience, it will only reach the head, not the heart, and probably not the will.”⁶

Respond

People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

It's a cliché, but one that's repeated for a reason — there is truth behind it! Discussions about faith are best had in the context of relationship. People don't want to feel like they've been wrangled into a debate that we're trying to win. That's one reason why at Christ Fellowship our vision rests on creating space for meaningful conversations, where people can experience

⁴ Wright, 55.

⁵ Scot McKnight, *Galatians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 221.

⁶ Wright, 54.

Christ through us. We want people to know that we care before we share what we know. Pray for the Spirit to give you opportunities for these meaningful conversations.

Day 5

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Happy Friday!

Let's take some time reflect on what we're learning here in Galatians, spend some time with the Father as we rejoice in the work of the Son, and ask the Spirit to guide us according the Word.

Reflect

Take the mid-letter challenge. Go back and read Galatians 1:1–4:7 if you haven't already done so this week. Can you trace the flow of Paul's argument? Can you feel his sense of urgency?

Take another look at [Galatians 4:8–20](#).

- What are Paul's main points in this passage? What emotions do you detect behind his words? Why do you think persuading the Galatians is so important to Paul?
- What has stayed with you personally as you've studied this passage?

Connect

Paul loved the Galatian Christians. He brought them the gospel and taught them what it meant to follow Jesus. He lived with them for a time and got to know them as his brothers and sisters in Christ. In his letter, we see how concerned he was for them — concerned they had been persuaded to go the wrong way.

Because Jesus was given all authority in heaven and earth, he commissioned his followers, including us, to go and make disciples — teaching them to obey what Jesus commanded. In Colossians, Paul tells us to “let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom” (3:16). In Hebrews, we're called to “spur each other on in love and good deeds” (10:24). In the family of God, we are called to help one another grow in spiritual maturity — grow to be more like Jesus.

This means sometimes meaningful conversations are difficult conversations. Sometimes we have to sit across from someone and tell them with tears in our eyes and love in our hearts that we see them moving in a direction that will lead them away from God. Whether we believe they are wrong in the way they're thinking, or wrong in the way they're living, those

conversations are not about proving ourselves right. We're to humbly tell the truth as best we understand it. We don't want to be judgmental or "holier than thou," but speak as those who know they are saved by grace, and who strive to love people the way Jesus does.

Of course, these conversations take wisdom and Spirit-led discernment, and must be bathed in prayer. Timing and tactics matter. Paul's approach may not be the right one. But we can let his motive be ours — love of God and love of people.

Respond

Slow down, pray over these prompts, and ask the Spirit to direct you.

Ask the Father:

- What do you want me to take away from what I've studied this week? What do you want me to remember and keep present with me?
- What do you want me to do with the truth of your Word? What is the one, next, right step that you want me to take?
- What are you teaching me about you? About who you are and the relationship I have with you? How can I worship and love you based on what you've revealed?

Pray for the opportunity for meaningful conversations— to share the good news of what Jesus has done for us!

Next week

Paul is going to take us back to the Old Testament once again to help us see the beauty of the gospel he is proclaiming.